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Some Bird Notes from the Central Sierras

BY CHARLES R. KEYES

(Concluded from page 17)

BUT little mention seems to have been made of the tree swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) from the higher altitudes of this region. They were fairly common at Blood's and especially toward evening they would come and circle about Mr. Blood's barn in company with the cliff swallows, which had here a nesting colony. On the afternoon of June 14 nearly a score of them were present and, as they eddied about over the meadow and around the buildings, the air seemed alternately to be filled now with tree and now with cliff swallows. Although the two species appeared to be playing together, yet it seemed that the succeeding waves of flight were made up of one species only. No nesting sites were noted in Bear Valley, though the species was found breeding near Blue Lakes, elevation 8000 feet, and also at Lake Tahoe, as noted by Mr. Beck and cited by Mr. Barlow. The nest seen near Blue Lakes on June 23 was in a hole in a Murray pine eighteen feet above the ground and two feet above a burrow of Williamson sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*), which was also occupied. The sapsucker's nest contained noisy young. The contents of the swallow's nest remained undetermined, it being necessary at this point to keep up with our party and procession of burros.

Mr. Belding mentions the presence of the phainopepla (*Phainopepla nitens*) both summer and winter in the foothills of Calaveras county. To fix its occurrence at the 2000 foot elevation a few miles north of latitude 38°, I shall record it as apparently common at Douglas Flat on May 31. It should be said that the country here is essentially of a foothill nature, however. A small area of arable land exists here just below the belts of the yellow and sugar pines and the immediate surroundings are barren. I say the bird was apparently common from the fact that single birds or pairs of birds usually the latter flying along rapidly and close together could be recorded every few minutes during the two midday hours that we spent here. Never more than three birds were seen at one time, so it would be difficult to say just how numerous the species really was. They flew about in a nervous manner and were difficult to approach. Their chief attraction was some cherry trees belonging to the ranch where we stopped, the fruit being ripe and furnishing food to the phainopeplas, as we had occasion to witness. A mummified specimen was incidentally found hanging in one of the trees, a victim, I judged, of the ranchman's gun.

Next to the Audubon warbler the pileolated warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla pileolata*) was most frequently noted, being seen at all altitudes but with especial frequency among the willows and dwarf aspens of such meadows as Bear Valley. I would hardly call it, however, a really common bird. On June 17 I noticed a small nest which later proved to belong to this species, fitted snugly into a slight hollow of the ground in a scattered growth of yeratrum. The spot was close to a small stream and very damp. It was evidently a new nest and completed, so I waited some minutes in hopes of seeing the builder but without results. The following day the nest contained an egg but no bird could be attracted to the spot. An egg was added daily thereafter until the 21st, when, with four eggs in the nest, the female was found sitting and so tame that I could approach within two feet of her. The nest was a considerable mass of weed stems, dry leaves and grass and the inner cavity, which was an inch and a half deep and the same in diameter, was lined with fine grass and white cow hair.

Of all Sierra birds none seemed to possess a greater breadth and depth of character and none impressed its individuality more deeply upon us travelers than the stout-hearted little mountain chickadee (*Parus gambeli*). From Big Trees on to end of the trip he was ever with us and, while always tending strictly to his own affairs and resenting any intrusion on his own, he was yet far from unsociable and his clear high-pitched notes helped to interpret the spirit of the forest and the mountain. In every way he seemed to justify his position of high development among birds to which he has been assigned. His independence of thought (or is it only instinct?) and action were well shown in his defense of his home. The sitting bird would either slip quietly from its nest when danger was still afar off or would resolutely refuse to budge at all. The sound emitted by a sitting mountain chickadee when disturbed was, in my experience, rather that of a sudden expulsion of air from the lungs than that of the hiss of a snake, as Mr. Barlow describes it.^a The explosive sound was accompanied by a very decided beat of both wings against the sides and bottom of the nest cavity. Seven nests were noted in all, four of them being in the usual nesting sites between three and eighteen feet above the ground, as given in Mrs. Bailey's Handbook. The other three pairs refused to be bound by the ordinary rules for conventional chickadees and placed their homes at less ambitious elevations. One pair chose a small and well protected natural cavity in a living juniper and built the nest at a height of twelve inches from the ground, the entrance being eight inches higher and quite small. This nest contained on June 19 seven unspotted eggs nearly ready to hatch. Another pair made use of a small burnt tamarack stump which contained a natural cavity, the rather small opening of which was just twelve inches above the ground. This cavity was straight and vertical and slightly over twelve inches in depth, so that the nest was on an exact level with the surface of the ground. This nest contained five fresh spotted eggs on June 17 on which the parent was sitting. The third pair of birds worthy of particular mention had their home in a natural cavity of a big pine stump near Blood's corral. The entrance was an inch wide, one and a half inches high, quite regular in shape and exactly one inch above the ground. The cavity sloped slightly downward for ten inches to the nest, which was thus eight inches at least beneath the surface of the soil. The nest was observed several times on June 21, the parent sometimes leaving the nest hole when I was still some distance off and again refusing to leave on any provocation. Seven unspotted eggs constituted the complement and from appearances I judged them to be advanced in incubation. In case of most of these nests it was of course necessary to enlarge the entrance somewhat in order to arrive at the desired information. So far as I observed this did not in any case cause the birds to forsake their nests.

Of water birds only five species were noted on the entire trip, viz., Forster tern, black tern, spotted sandpiper, killdeer, and an unidentified duck. My notes on these are hardly satisfactory enough to justify any lengthening of the present article.

An early summer trip to the Sierras is both a thing to be enjoyed in the making and a memory of incomparable worth. All the better if one may allow the birds to add to the joys inspired by grand scenery and mountain air. One may well repeat Belding's and Barlow's advice to visit these mountains for oneself or Muir's enthusiastic cry: "Come to the mountains and see!"

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^a THE CONDOR, III, p. 113.